New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 25 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 21, 1949

1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premiers in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

Stage Play	*Page*
1948 Vol.	
Anne of the Thousand Days	128
*As the Girls Go	159
Don't Listen, Ladies	100
Edward, My Son	214
*Goodbye, My Fancy	152
Inside U.S.A.	279
Jenny Kissed Me	112
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
*Lend an Ear	122
Life With Mother	182
Light Up the Sky	148
Love Life	201
*Madwoman of Chaillot (The)	104
Make Mine Manhattan	382
Make Way for Lucia	115
*Mister Roberts	338
My Romance	186
Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!	108
Private Lives	209
Rape of Lucretia (The)	95
Red Gloves	132
Silver Whistle (The)	139
Small Wonder	244
Summer and Smoke	205
*Where's Charley?	197
Young and Fair (The)	143
1947 Vol.	
High Button Shoes	304
*Streetcar Named Desire (A)	249
1946 Vol.	
Annie Get Your Gun	382
*Born Yesterday	466
1944 Vol.	
Harvey	95

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 21, 1949*

1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1949

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
All for Love	377
Along Fifth Avenue	392
Anybody Home	346
At War With the Army	336
Big Knife (The)	349
Biggest Thief in Town (The)	325
Blackouts	273
*Browning Version (The)	253
Cabalgata	284
*Death of a Salesman	358
*Detective Story	330
*Diamond Lil	369
*Father (The)	223
Forward the Heart	374
Funzapoppin	288
Gayden	296
Happiest Years (The)	304
*Harlequinade (A)	253
H.M.S. Pinafore	247
*I Know My Love	33
Ivy Green (The)	316
Leaf and Bough	381
*Lost in the Stars	241
Love Me Long	228
Magnolia Alley	308
Mikado (The)	264
*Miss Liberty	280
Mr. Adam	292
Mrs. Gibbons' Boys	300
*Montserrat	244
My Name Is Aquilon	362
Night in Spain (A) (Cabalgata)	284
Pirates of Penzance (The)	257
*Regina	237
Richard III	365
Shop at Sly Corner (The)	386
Smile of the World (The)	396
*South Pacific	312
They Knew What They Wanted	354
*Touch and Go	250
Traitor (The)	322
Trial by Jury	247
Twelfth Night	267
Two Blind Mice	342
*Yes, M'Lord	261
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	302

THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Father"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 21, 1949*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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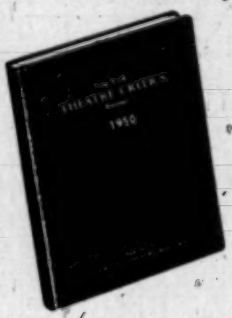

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"The Father"

The Sun

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

A Harsh and Exhausting Play.

"The Father," August Strindberg's play of a gnawing and hellish woman who seeks to break the will and destroy the mind of her army husband, was given a good production last night at the Cort, but it comes through as a harsh, unconvincing and exhausting drama, and it seems a dubious contribution to the theater of the moment.

Here, in Strindberg's psychological tragedy, is the story of the gradual disintegration of a cavalry captain under the cunning and calculated viciousness of his fanatical wife. She torments him over household details, intercepts his mail, battles with him over the education of their daughter and gives him the terrible suspicion, and finally the conviction, that he is not the child's father. Eventually, she achieves a triumph in having him put into a strait jacket as a victim of insanity, but it is a shattered and terrified woman who gazes upon the Captain as he dies.

"The Father" is a well-constructed play, and it has been so regarded for sixty years. It is also a play of unrelieved terror and undiminishing grimness. The characters are well drawn, but the piling up of sheer horror does not bring about a drama of cumulative strength. Strindberg's loathing for all of womankind gives his play the effect of being outworn. As "The Father" now goes its way bleakly and uncompromisingly, it becomes overdone and overwrought.

Donald Oenslager has supplied a fine realistic setting for the interior of the Captain's house at an army post in the north of Sweden in 1887. Raymond Massey brings force and vibrance, along with a measure of monotony, to his playing of the strong-willed Captain, who finds himself no match for the wiles and the lies and the utter ruthlessness of the demoniacal Laura, a character created by Strindberg, the misogynist, in his general contempt of her sex. Mady Christians is moderately successful in her projection of the ferocity, the treachery, the malevolence and the hysteria of a woman unwilling to consider her mind inferior to that of her soldier-scientist husband.

There is good work from players in the quieter roles—from John D. Seymour as the doctor, Philip Huston as the pastor, Mary Morris as the old and grieving nurse and Charles Snyder as a soldier. Grace Kelly, in the part of the daughter, makes a thoroughly impressive Broadway debut.

Raymond Massey has given skillful direction to the production of Richard W. Krakeur and Robert L. Joseph, but "The Father," for all of its standing in the drama's library, is now a play of too much sheer viciousness; it is too much of a tract. There is also the inescapable fact that the drama at the Cort is dated—and shows it.

"THE FATHER"

A revival of the play by August Strindberg; adaptation by Robert L. Joseph; staged by Raymond Massey; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith; presented by Richard W. Krakeur and Mr. Joseph, in association with Harry Brandt, at the Cort Theatre, November 16, 1949. The cast:

A Captain of Cavalry.....Raymond Massey
A Soldier.....Charles Snyder
The Pastor.....Philip Huston
Another Soldier....Paul Larson
The Captain's Wife.....Mady Christians
The Doctor....John D. Seymour
The Nurse.....Mary Morris
The Captain's Daughter...Grace Kelly

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place in the captain's house at an army post in the north of Sweden. Time: 1887. Act I-Evening. Act II-Late that Night. Act III-The next afternoon.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

August Strindberg Snarls at Women

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

There is a widespread belief that August Strindberg, Swedish woman-hater, wrote plays about the battle of the sexes. Nothing, I suspect, could be farther from the truth. Certainly it was not a battle that the eminent dramatist described in "The Father" which was offered at the Cort Theatre last night. It was a massacre, a slaughter of the innocent, with helpless and gullible man cut down without a chance to defend himself by his merciless natural enemy, woman. Indeed, so one-sided is the contest that, for all the fascination of the homicidal spectacle, its dramatic interest is curtailed by the inequality of the combatants.

Undeniably, there is something fascinating about the venomous loathing that Strindberg had for women. His bitter, neurotic, hysterical hatred gave a savage strength to what he had to say, and there is no escaping the diabolical power of his famous account of the manner in which the wife of a Swedish cavalry officer drives her husband to madness by making him doubt that he is actually the father of the daughter he loves. Hate can be a fine motivating force for a playwright, and the sight of the hapless husband, betrayed by the women of his household and deserted by his fellow men, is a harrowing sin.

Price to Pay

At the same time, Strindberg undoubtedly had to pay a price for the intensity of his venom. He was so outraged by what he saw as the baleful cruelty of woman's ruthless determination to dominate, and the weakness of masculine will in its futile efforts to resist that domination, that his hysteria in the end loses a great deal of its plausibility. The conspiracy of the terrifying wife and the gullibility of the men of his story in not seeing through her schemes become too overwrought and heavily belabored to be completely persuasive or dramatically satisfying.

The influence of Strindberg over so many distinguished dramatists of today is unquestionable, and it is clear that he was a playwright of lasting eminence. There is even a greater tendency on the part of many critics throughout the world to say that he is greater than Ibsen. With all due respect to him and them, I am inclined to doubt it. The intensity of his emotions, the forcefulness of his viewpoint, and the tremendous concentration of his dramatic style cannot be overlooked, but "The Father" is a titanic display of violent, embittered passion, rather than the moving masterpiece it is often considered.

Diminishing Returns

Compactness and concentration of interest can be notable virtues in the theatre, but there is a little too much of them in "The Father." There is no letting up for a moment, and, considerably before the final tragic act comes to an end, a law of diminishing returns sets in. What has been an enormous emotional power becomes a little too strained and fatiguing. It is clear that the work you are seeing is that of a giant, but it is a giant grown too clumsy and heavy-handed in his hysterical indignation. There is lacking the tragic magnificence of Ibsen at his best.

The current production is, of course, more professional in its quality than the one offered at the Provincetown Playhouse last summer, but it is not really much more satisfying. Raymond Massey, as the tormented captain, and Mady Christians, as the horrible wife, are expert actors who give strong, interesting portrayals, but somehow I found Miss Christians a less sinister figure than the unknown Anne Shropshire, who had the role in the downtown presentation. Of the supporting players, I thought John D. Seymour as the doctor and the lovely Grace Kelly as the daughter were the most effective.

Daily Mirror

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

Strindberg's 'The Father' Proves Classic Bore

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Watching a ruthless, iron-willed woman destroy an intelligent, gifted husband could prove as fascinating for a playgoer as the observation of the lethal machinations of the Black Widow spider are supposed to be for an entomologist. But the above situation, as unfolded in August Strindberg's "The Father" at the Cort Theatre last evening, was for us anything but fascinating.

Strindberg was a misogynist. Boy, he really hated women. And he delighted in stacking the cards against them in his plays. He thought women vain, merciless, cruel and unscrupulous. The best of them, for him, were a bad lot. His feminine portraits were etched in acid or charcoal black.

It took Mady Christians a seemingly interminable time to drive Raymond Massey crazy, by planting in his mind doubts as to a daughter's paternity. By the clock, it wasn't really so long; it just seemed so. With Papa Massey in a strait-jacket, Mama Christians gained control of their stage daughter's future. Scientific-minded Papa Massey wanted the daughter to be a teacher, a resourceful girl. Mama Christians wanted her to dabble in art. So she won, while Massey and I lost.

Richard W. Krakeur and Robert L. Joseph, in association with Harry Brandt, are presenting "The Father" in an English version by Joseph, directed by Massey. The production came over the footlights to us as a stocky, stilted debate rather than exciting drama, and we have heard better debates on the subject in less time and for less money.

Father and mother are stereotypes rather than people. You ought to feel for papa. You ought to be moved, but you seldom are. The Massey and Christians performances are, on the whole, restrained—for Strindberg—though more than a little stained-glassy.

Philip Huston, a good actor, is a bit wooden as the pastor, due we suspect to the staging. Mary Morris, as the nurse, kept reminding us of Gilbert and Sullivan's piratical Ruth. Faring best, we thought, are John D. Seymour as the doctor and Grace Kelly as the daughter. Miss Kelly is a young actress of quality. She is worth watching.

While exiting from the Cort we caught snatches of a lobby symposium. "What," asked one first-nighter, "is a classic? And who determines when a classic is a classic?" "Textbook writers and college professors," replied another. Well, for us, "The Father" is a classic bore.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

Mady Christians Outstanding in Well Done Revival of 'The Father'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The oldest of all the wars—the one between the sexes—has lately become comic. The divorce-court complaints of her against him or him against her make good light reading—often the only light reading—in one's morning paper. The few strips which remain funny in the funny papers, like "Moon Mullins," "Mr. and Mrs." and "Bringing Up Father," chronicle the gaieties of this incessant battle. But there was nothing funny about Man vs. Woman in 1887 when Sweden's pioneer realist, August Strindberg, wrote "The Father." Nothing funny, at any rate, to Mr. Strindberg.

"The Father" was revived last evening at the Cort Theatre and it is as grim and bitter a job as it ever was, with Mady Christians, Mary Morris and Raymond Massey giving good, strong performances. This new production, offered by Richard W. Krakeur and Robert L. Joseph, is presented with style and finish and is a fine opportunity to brush up on the best work of one of the pathfinders of modern drama.

Historically Interesting.

But "The Father" impresses me less than it did 20 years ago, when Robert Loraine and Haidee Wright were the warriors. The play and I are 20 years older, and each of us has lost some vigor. I am willing to concede that it is unrelentingly hateful and admirably constructed, but can no longer kid myself into thinking it is great. Strindberg's violent disrespect for females is historically interesting to me as a paid playgoer, but my emotions don't get involved the way they should.

In "The Father" Miss Christians and Mr. Massey are a Scandinavian Emmy and Lord Plushbottom who are in a fight to the death. Each is determined to be stronger than the other, and Strindberg fixes it so that Mady wins by driving Mr. Massey out of his mind and into a straightjacket. As the embittered husband in the play puts it, it is the god of strife who rules our life.

First-Class Undertaking.

There is venom and violence in the drama even now, and Miss Christians gives a very fine performance of a woman possessed of deadly strength and purpose. Miss Morris has some excellent scenes as the old nurse. Mr. Massey plays the husband with well-calculated restraint—too well calculated, perhaps, for in his final mad scene in the straightjacket he could cut loose more than he does. When Strindberg drove this husband to defeat and distraction, he meant the character to be good and distracted.

"The Father" should have absorbed me completely, but it didn't. No fault of the players, who are very good, or of Mr. Massey, who directed, or of Donald Oenslager, who designed a fine set. My fault, I guess. I hope so, anyhow, for the production at the Cort is a first-class undertaking, inspired by noble motives.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

By HOWARD BARNES

You Are Old, Father

AUGUST Strindberg's savage tragedy of married life, "The Father," has been given a handsome and frequently eloquent revival at the Cort Theater. Raymond Massey plays the central role which he has likened to a combination of Hamlet and Lear with restrained fury, while Mady Christians is robustly evil as the wife who drives him to madness. Under Massey's careful direction the production has considerable tension, but on the whole it is a dated conversation piece, in which too much of the talk has little sense and dramatic meaning. The great pioneer of the modern realistic theater plumbed into his own strange complexes for the material of "The Father." They rarely have emotional urgency.

• • •

Strindberg wrote the play in 1887, after his unhappy marriage to Siri Wrangel. He wrote it in acid. To the bitter war between men and women which he made the burden of the plot, he added father and mother fixations of a complex nature and an obsession with adultery. Robert L. Joseph, the co-producer of the offering, has written a workable English version of the tragedy, but the tragedy itself is unrelieved. The cavalry captain's efforts to have his wife confess that he is not the father of their daughter become tedious, until the final scene in which he is lured into a straitjacket. His suspicions that all women are conspiring against him turn to rantings rather than the elucidation of a psychopathological problem.

• • •

As a series of performances, there is little wanting in "The Father." Massey is superbly harassed as the Swedish officer in an army post who endures mean deceits and the effort to break his will for twenty years of marriage to a woman who hates him. With exquisite modulation, he traces the final crack-up of the man during two fateful days. It is the classic itself which keeps him from giving the character truly heroic dimensions. He is at his best in the rigid scenes with a doctor and a pastor, the violent outburst in which he hurls an oil lamp at his wife, or in the terrible climax. It is a rich role for an actor and he has exploited it admirably.

Miss Christians is asked to be a Circe rather than a woman and she only succeeds partly in blending villainy with an overweening vanity. The passage in which she adamantly stands her ground as her husband begs for his reason is forceful and so are those in which she twists the truth to put him in a madhouse. Mary Morris is the most sympathetic of the women characters in the play and she brings the role all the sympathy she can muster, while Philip Huston, John D. Seymour and Grace Kelly add immeasurably to a brilliantly acted revival. Meanwhile, Donald Oenslager has contributed an excellent setting and resourceful lighting and Eleanor Goldsmith has designed good period costumes. "The Father" has vigor and terror, but it is something of a museum piece.

Journal American

NOVEMBER 17, 1949

Cast is Inadequate In 'Problem Play'

By ROBERT GARLAND

And this, my limp, long-suffering pupils, is what used to be known as a "problem play." Before the First World War, August Strindberg was the Tennessee Williams of his era. His, too, were anti-female fixations. He, too, made fame and fortune by kicking the ladies with the curtain raised.

Twelve years after the worm of a century turned, "The Father," before which you sat last evening in the overheated Cort, was first publically exposed to a New York congregation. Warner Oland and Frederic Burt produced it at the Berkeley Lyceum. And for their mutual actorial amusement, believe me,

There it ran—if you will pardon the exaggeration—for 31 consecutive performances. Elsewhere around town came short-shrift sowings of the same Mr. Strindberg's "The Stronger," "Pariah" and "The Countess Julia." "The Father" came on and off again in 1928. Eight more straight showings.

Three years later, Lee Shubert, of all producers, put it on again preceded by, of all things, "Barbara's Wedding," written by, of all people, J. M. Barrie. Now, as there is small need to tell you, it is on West 48th Street with Raymond Massey, Mady Christians and Mary Morris.

• • •

'The Villagers' Tried It

If, today on Broadway at the Cort, "The Father" is not as impressive as it was not long ago off Broadway at the Provincetown, it is not as well acted, either. The Villagers, you must remember, made quite a showy show of it, a sort of uproarious "Angel Street" with the sexes turned round about.

Uptown, with more deliberation than skill, it does give itself some of the downtown works. These off-stage disturbances, like marbles in The Captain's overhead, are the antics in the attic, the ghosts in the guest-room and the stompings on the stairs demanded by the Swedish Tennessee Williams.

The Captain with the marbles in his overhead is The Father of the title. Everybody except The Nurse is in phony fear of him. A double double-crosser, it is she who, whispering sweet bedside stories in his ear, wraps him up in a strait-jacket and delivers him intact to the boys in white from Bedlam.

And why is Dear Dad dotty? He is dotty because Dear Mom suggests the illegitimacy of Dear Daughter. In the end, those Bedlam boys nab him, just as, at the Ethel Barrymore, they nab Dear Blanche Du Bois in the American August Strindberg's "A Streetcar Named Desire."

• • •

Performers Inadequate

Pupils with minds and opinions of their own should not take the opinion of their teacher without question. So, if you see fit, please contradict me flatly when I report that, in these pedagogic eyes, the performers at the Cort are far from being everything they should be. If theirs is good honest acting, make mine ham.

Florid, unreasonable and revengeful as it is, if "The Father" is not a showpiece for today's performers, it is nothing but a left-over problem play from the distant days when problem plays were fashionable. Eugene O'Neill was the Great American dramatist and World Wars and world worries were yet to come.

Such performances as there are to praise—and these but mildly—are those of Paul Larson as Another Soldier, Philip Huston as The Pastor and John Seymour as The Doctor. And, as I almost forgot to mention, Mr. Huston's super sideburns and the over-sized strait-jacket provided by (I quote) Joe and Henry (unquote).

As you might expect, Donald Oenslager's setting is properly Strindbergian, as are, I fancy, Eleanor Goldsmith's costumes. And that, my limp, long-suffering pupils, is all your teacher has to say about the Richard W. Krakeur, Robert L. Joseph, Harry (no middle initial) Brandt unearthing at the Cort.